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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2018
TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [KU](#)
SUBJECT: (C/NF) RESPONSE TO REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON
KUWAITI LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS (C-NE8-01319)

REF: A. SECSTATE 68899
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 0043
[1](#)C. KUWAIT 0799

Classified By: The Ambassador for reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (S/NF) This message is an initial response to ref A request for additional reporting on the ruling Al Sabah family's decision-making processes, as well as the relationship between Amir Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah and Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Ahmad Al Sabah. Responses are keyed to the questions posed in paragraph 1 of ref A.

[1](#)A. (S/NF) To what extent is Prime Minister (PM) Shaykh Nasser independently determining the family's strategy in dealing with the National Assembly and other political challenges?

General consensus among Kuwaitis close to the Amir, including members of the ruling family, is that PM Shaykh Nasser was selected by the Amir for this position precisely because he represented the least common denominator: non-controversial, diplomatic in his bearing and background, and unlikely to rock any political boats. Our sense is that the Amir remains the bottom line of leadership authority in Kuwait, to the extent that he chooses to exercise it (which is increasingly rare). For example, although the Amir publicly empowered the PM to select new cabinet members following the May 17 parliamentary elections, the PM's role with the National Assembly and the cabinet has been somewhat diffident and restricted; his previous two terms as PM have ended with the Amir abruptly dissolving the National Assembly when its criticisms of government policies and ministers, and the PM himself, got out of hand. More recently there has been an attempt to burnish the PM's credentials via highly visible travel to a number of Asian nations, including Kuwait, major energy customers Japan and South Korea. Whether this will result in greater policy assertiveness on his part is doubtful.

[1](#)B. (S/NF) Who is advising PM Shaykh Nasser? To what degree are the Amir and the Amir's advisors involved in guiding the PM's decisions? How do the Amir's advisors perceive the PM, and how do they work with him?

The PM's circle of advisors appears to be limited to 3-4 individuals, including prominent newspaper owner and columnist Dr. Mohammed Al-Rumeihi and the Amir's niece, Shaykha Itimad Khaled Al-Ahmed Al Sabah, who serves as Under Secretary in the PM's diwan, and - reportedly not widely known - the Amir's Office Director Ahmad al-Fahd (not to be confused with Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahd, President of the National Security Bureau, who is seen as the PM's chief rival).

These relationships and the decision making process remain fairly opaque. In contrast to most of our interlocutors, who consider the PM to be extremely weak and ineffectual, his advisors remain extremely loyal, citing the PM's personal qualities of kindness, diplomacy and generosity. The Amir's principal advisors include his son Shaykh Nasser al-Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, Economic Advisor Dr. Yousef Al-Ibrahim, and Dr. Ismail Al-Shatti. The Amir also relies heavily on his half brother, Shaykh Mish'al al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah and his nephew (and PM rival) Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahad al-Ahmad Al Sabah. There are intrinsic rivalries amongst the Amir, s and PM, s advisors and it, s not clear to what extent they coordinate or even interact other than socially. (Note: The extended family relationships here lead to intriguing arrangements, for example the PM, s very talented son, Shaykh Ahmad Nasser Al Sabah, serves as Office Director to FM Dr. Mohamed Al Sabah, also seen as a potential rival to the PM, although that relationship pre-dates the PM's assumption of power and is based on a close personal relationship between Dr. Mohamed and Shaykh Ahmad. Similarly, the CP's office director Athbi al-Fahd is the brother of the PM's rival, Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahd. End Note).

1C. (S/NF) Who are PM Shaykh Nasser's allies in the family?

The PM has neither close allies nor deep enmities within the ruling family, which was apparently one of the criteria considered by the Amir in selecting him. Having spent much of his professional life abroad in Kuwait's diplomatic service (including 11 years in Tehran), the PM lacks the domestic power base that would enable him to manipulate or maneuver his foes in the National Assembly. He is said to

have a close relationship to Kuwait's Ambassador to the US, Shaykh Salem Al Sabah, who is not considered a player in internal family politics. Within the family, broadly speaking, alliances are as much about protecting turf as they are about personal loyalty. For example, Interior Minister Shaykh Jaber Al Sabah, protects the PM and by extension his own cabinet position against possible encroachment by Shaykh Ahmed al-Fahd Al Sabah, president of Kuwait's relatively new National Security Bureau, which has overlapping responsibilities.

1D. (S/NF) What reaction have PM Shaykh Nasser's rivals, including director of the Citizens' Services Authority Shaykh Mohammad al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al Sabah (self-designated) and Amiri Diwan minister Nasser al-Sabah al-Ahmed Al Sabah had to recent events?

Though no criticism is directly levied at the Amir, his government, and particularly the PM, is widely perceived as weak. PM Shaykh Nasser's principal rival is the Amir's nephew and "president" of the relatively new "National Security Board," Shaykh Ahmed al-Fahd Al Sabah. Shaykh Ahmed al-Fahd is clever and ambitious and is widely seen as being the only member of the ruling family having both the will and the capacity to rule. He is also widely perceived as being corrupt, together with his close ally the Amir's half-brother Misha'al. Openly contemptuous of the PM, Ahmad al-Fahd believes the GoK has not done enough to manage its own restive tribal and Salafist populations; at the same time he has been accused of manipulating parliamentary elections for tribal gains as a means of generating loyalty. His relationship with his uncle the Amir reportedly has been rocky of late.

Amiri Diwan minister and son of the Amir Shaykh Nasser al-Sabah Al-Ahmed Al Sabah generally has avoided open political involvement or discourse, apart from loyally articulating his father's vision of Kuwait as a major cultural, touristic and economic entrepot for the northern Gulf region, and ostensibly focuses on enhancing his magnificent private art collection. However, Al Sabah family members have told us he remains a determined rival who quietly undermines the PM behind the scenes as he awaits his

opportunity to ascend to power. Shaykh Nasser al-Sabah has also been entrusted by the Amir with maintaining a discreet and confidential liaison relationship with a dual national Israeli representative based elsewhere in the Gulf.

Shaykh Mohammed al-Abdullah al-Mubarak Al Sabah, who is married to Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahd's sister Bibi, is not himself a rival of the PM. Shaykh Mohammed al-Abdullah enjoys a certain access to the Amir by virtue of his pedigree: he is one of two or three surviving grandchildren of the nearly mythic Mubarak ibn Sabah Al Sabah (known as "The Great"), who is the brother of Kuwait's first Emir Shaykh Jaber bin Abdullah Al Sabah and who ruled Kuwait from 1896-1915. Shaykh Mohammed's influence remains unclear and by his own account he is on the "outs" with the Amir following his relatively blunt criticism of the PM's lack of leadership in addressing growing Salafist influence and attendant support for extremist ideologies in Kuwait.

1E. (S/NF) Has PM Shaykh Nasser increased his chances of becoming the next crown prince?

No. On the contrary, many -- including some within the ruling family -- are quietly suggesting that a "correction" may be necessary in terms of succession politics. Although well-liked on a personal level, Shaykh Nasser is perceived as a politically incompetent, protocol wonk whose record is tarnished by his failure to construct and effectively manage his cabinet. The current Crown Prince, Shaykh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah, is similarly (and correctly) viewed as being an extremely decent and nice, weak and ineffectual leader, thoroughly disengaged from politics. That said, the Amir will be reluctant to "depose" the PM following the public opprobrium generated by his unseemly unseating of the Father Amir, Shaykh Saad, and subsequent accession to the "throne."

1F. (S/NF) What impressions do senior Kuwaiti officials have of the Prime Minister? What events do these officials cite as key to shaping the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Amir?

Even as his leadership credentials are widely criticized, the

PM generally is personally well-liked, which appears to have been one of the most important criteria considered by the Amir in selecting him for the position, together with his unquestioned loyalty. Senior officials know that the PM wields only such authority as he is granted by the Amir, who is generally exempt from open criticism. Our sources tell us that the influential Speaker of Parliament, Jassem al-Khorafi, himself close to the Amir, has a uniquely conflictual relationship with the PM. (Note: In forming his government, the Amir for the first time divided what had been a combined portfolio into two, CP and PM, which had been a longstanding subject of discussion. This may have been a deliberate move to create a separate "lightning rod" for the National Assembly in the person of the PM, keeping the CP inviolate. End Note.)

Interestingly, during the July 20 visit of NODEL Reed, in which the Amir hosted a meeting and dinner in honor of Senator Barack Obama at his private residence, and included prominent members of the ruling family such as FM Shaykh Dr. Mohammed, Interior Minister Shaykh Jaber, Director of the National Security Bureau Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahed and his own half-brother Shaykh Misha'al, the PM remained largely disengaged, did not ask any questions (as did the FM and others) and sat through most of the event with a taciturn expression.

1G. (S/NF) In making the ruling family's political decisions, what role is the Amir playing?

By all accounts, the Amir has become increasingly passive -

some would suggest "passive aggressive," - in dealing with the political challenges confronting Kuwait. Some attribute this to ongoing depression following his beloved daughter Selwa's death five years ago, others attribute it to health concerns and heart surgery several years back, and still others say it is simply because he is getting old and tired. Whatever the cause, all agree the Amir no longer has the passion and energy for ruling that seemed to characterize his term as PM/CP, although others suggest he continues to micromanage on personnel appointments. His role may in fact be larger but simply not visible to us; his nickname within family circles is "the Crocodile" because of his tendency to come up quietly smiling and then "whack with his tail" anyone who gets out of line.

Our own analysis is that Kuwait's demographics have outpaced the state's mechanics of governance. The 1961 Constitution and National Assembly worked very well when political participation was limited to the well-entrenched, largely urban and self-interested merchant class, a handful of "intellectuals," and the ruling Al Sabah. Nearly 47 years later, participation has expanded to include a generally unruly and often resentful but demographically dominant Bedouin population with tribal and Salafist tendencies. Originally courted by the Al Sabah as a counterweight to the powerful merchants, this group now wields great disruptive power and seems intent on breaking down the old system of patronage, alleged corruption and mutual accommodation, mostly to ensure that they get more of the spoils. Traditional methods of governance based on face-saving consensus, or "ijma", and ultimate respect for the ruling family no longer achieve the desired results.

For example, the PM's June cabinet reshuffle was an attempt to accommodate the various elements of society within the newly-elected majority Islamist National Assembly. His cabinet included liberal independents, Salafists and Shia, but most importantly, ministers hailing from the four largest tribes in Kuwait in an effort to deflect tribal animosities away from the leadership and onto their elected and appointed members. This strategy has thus far proven unsuccessful.

1H. (S/NF) Why has the Amir withdrawn from day-to-day politics? Is the Amir essentially retired from political life?

This is a difficult question to answer, in part because the Amir's role is unclear. While some point to the Amir's health (he has a pace maker), age (79 or 82, depending on who you ask) or emotional health (his ongoing depression over his daughter Selwa's death), he may simply assess that rule by fiat is no longer possible with Kuwait's changing demographic. Lesser members of the ruling family and prominent merchants believe he (and the Al Sabah family) still wields this authority, but that may be wishful thinking.

That said, he does assert his constitutional authority without hesitation, declaring to the June opening session of the National Assembly that he would use his constitutional powers to dissolve the body again if it engaged in socially divisive behaviors.

There has been no indication otherwise that either health or age are constraints, apart from the occasional absence due to medical checkups or unspecified illness. In the past year alone, the Amir has maintained an active schedule, traveling to Great Britain, the United States, Mongolia, Morocco, Turkey, UAE, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Spain and Syria. He routinely receives ambassadorial credentials and has received senior USG leaders, including the President and the First Lady, separately; Secretaries of State, Defense, Homeland Security, as well as General Petraeus and Admirals Mullen and Fallon. He has hosted foreign dignitaries from all over the world, including Iranian FM Manouchehr Mottaki and U/S Ali Redha Shykh Attar, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, Spanish King Juan Carlos, Iraqi PM Nouri Al-Maliki, Afghanistan President Hamid

Karzai, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, Jordan's King Abdullah and GCC leaders.

1J. (S/NF) Why has the Amir not removed the Prime Minister, and under what circumstances would the Amir remove him?

The Amir appears to use the PM as a sort of political lightning rod in his efforts to balance power and manage his fractious parliament. Moreover, and more fundamentally, the Amir likes the PM on a personal level and knows that the PM is loyal to him; the PM has served with Shaykh Sabah in different capacities for the nearly 44 years the Amir served as FM. He will likely retain the PM, barring a catastrophic event, because the PM and his cabinet absorb much of the criticism of the GOK that might otherwise tar the Amir. The Amir may also fear that a stronger PM (such as a Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahad, or Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Sabah al-Salem Al Sabah) would usurp some of the authority of the Amir, much as the Amir himself did when he was PM. (Note: It is likely that the Amir appointed his younger, weaker half brother Shaykh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah as Crown Prince (CP) for this reason. By tradition, it was incumbent on the Amir to choose a crown prince from the al-Salem vice al-Jaber branch. The Amir side-stepped this tradition to select his brother. CP Shaykh Nawaf and PM Shaykh Nasser, both non-threatening personalities, were appointed by the Amir, reportedly without Al Sabah family consultation, on the same day in February 2006. End Note.)

When the Amir was serving as the PM in 2003, Shaykh Nasser was then serving as Minister of the Amiri Diwan. After the death of former Amir Shaykh Jaber, Shaykh Sabah was the most viable candidate for Amir during the tumultuous two weeks that Shaykh Saad al-Abdullah al-Salem Al Sabah was Amir (prior to being declared physically and mentally incapacitated). Many Kuwaitis felt that Shaykh Sabah was overly ambitious and though he was the heir apparent to the throne, handled his ascension to the Amirship with less grace and more ambition than appropriate (he actually released Shaykh Saad's health records to the National Assembly), and it was the well-positioned Shaykh Nasser (who had been in the Amiri Diwan since 2003), who smoothed the family feathers ruffled by Shaykh Sabah's disruptive path to power. (Note: Shaykh Sabah -- appointed PM in 2003 -- was the first non-Crown Prince to hold that position; this anomaly occurred as a result of the then-CP's mental incapacitation. End Note.)

1K. (S/NF) What impressions do senior Kuwaiti officials, such as National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi, have of the Amir?

No GOK official, and very rarely anyone else outside of the family, speaks ill of the Amir openly in this small and close-knit society. His position is imbued with authority beyond his person.

Jassem Al-Khorafi, as Speaker of the National Assembly, is the third most senior leader in Kuwait after the Amir and Crown Prince. The Al-Khorafi family is one of the two richest business families in Kuwait, if not the world, and the Speaker's personal wealth represents a key line of influence and power. Al-Khorafi is considered to be very close to the Amir. Al-Khorafi finds himself in the unique position of balancing economic and political agendas in his

dealings with both the MPs and ruling family members. Politically, he does not threaten the Amir or the Al Sabah family. His job involves managing the unruly National Assembly from whence he derives his political power. Thus far, the Amir has been content to grant him latitude in running the National Assembly knowing that if too many red lines are crossed, the Amir retains the constitutional right to dissolve the body.

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